Zonal Railway Service Commission*

L. N. Mishra

I am happy to be with you on this Gandhi Jayanti day today. It is a day of great significance to all of us in India, more so to the people of North Bihar. Fifty-six years ago, in Champaran, not far from this historic centre of Vaishali culture, Gandhiji fashioned the unique weapon of Satyagraha which laid the foundations of the Indian people's struggle against foreign domination and exploitation of the weak by the strong. From that day onwards the land of Mithila, Vaishali and Bhojpur made great contributions to the freedom struggle and ever remained in the forefront of the Indian people's onward march to complete independence. Notwithstanding its economic backwardness this region has kept alive its cultural heritage which has seen a fresh and vibrant revival in the years since Independence.

This would show that material poverty does not necessarily lead to impoverishment of the spirit and mind of man.

At the same time, the problem of economic backwardness has to be solved and employment opportunities created so that we can realize the goal set by our Prime Minister and great leader, Shrimati Indira Gandhi, of eradicating poverty from our midst in the foreseeable future.

The project which I have been called upon to launch today is yet another step in our programme to provide opportunities for employment in economically backward regions of the country.

After a review of the functioning of the Railway Service Commissions a few months ago, I came to the conclusion that the pattern of recruitment to Railway Services, which we had inherited from the British days, has to be changed. By locating the Service Commissions in the major metropolitan cities of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras, we were placing the candidates of the backward areas at a certain disadvantage. In the pursuit of our objective of equal opportunities and development of the backward regions,

* Speech on the occasion of the inauguration of the Railway Service Commission.

I therefore, decided that each of the nine Zonal Railways should have a Service Commission of its own, thus bringing about great decentralisation in the work of the Service Commissions which recruit a large number of people in Class III posts. As a first step, therefore, a full-fledged Railway Service Commission is being set up at Muzaffarpur for recruiting staff for the North Eastern Railway. The young men and women of the region seeking employment on this Railway will not have to travel far for their written test and interview. The Commission at Allahabad which was so far recruiting staff for both the Northern and North Eastern Railways will also have less load to handle and get much needed relief.

At the same time, we have set up a sub-office of the Calcutta Service Commission at Ranchi, in the heart of the Adivasi belt. This will help attract suitable scheduled tribe candidates in large numbers to Railway services through publicity, and vocational and educational counselling.

Our Railways can rightly be considered as one of the leading employment generating sectors of the economy. The staff strength of the Railways, one of the largest employers, is currently close to 1.4 million, apart from 3.2 lakh casual workers, and comprises jobs covering an exceptionally wide range of skills, talents and specializations. As you may be aware, since the inception of planning a little over two decades ago massive investments have been undertaken to modernize the Railway network.

Indeed, without this modernization effort, the Railways would not have been in a position to meet the spurt in traffic resulting from the growth of investment and output in the productive sectors of the economy. The introduction of more modern and perfected techniques often leaves little room for increasing employment opportunities without raising costs.

Even so, over the two decades ending in 1971-72, nearly half-a-million more jobs were created within the railway system. Again, even between 1960-61 and 1971-72, aggregate employment in the Railways recorded an increase of as much as 2.3 lakhs, which is an increase of is over a fifth.

The North Eastern Railway, too, shared in the general growth of railway employment; from 1960-61 to 1971-72, the staff strength of North Eastern Railway went up from 83,400 to 94,900. Like in the rest of our Railway system, Class III and IV employees make up almost the total strength of the North Eastern Railway, Class I and II staff accounting for less than one per cent of its total strength.

I, therefore, consider the Railways as a vital factor in our national policy of maximizing employment opportunities and I am determined to exploit this potential to its fullest extent.

The new approach that I have outlined in recent months of opening up backward areas, fits in very well with this policy.

Construction of new lines, gauge conversion, doubling of tracks, construction of bridges and expansion of suburban services generate a large volume of employment. The provision of new railway facilities or restoration of old links, which we have undertaken, especially in this region and other backward areas, indirectly creates and sustains the growth of employment by stimulating and accelerating the process of development.

The Railways' Fifth Five Year Plan, therefore, has to be viewed not only in relation to rail transport requirements of the economy but also in the light of its direct and indirect contribution to employment generation.

There was little by way of the construction of new railway lines during the Fourth Plan period; but, particular emphasis is now being placed on the opening up of new lines, and restoration of old ones, in backward areas.

The long run developmental benefits of such investments are not usually reflected in short run profitability. Accordingly, the Railways have taken the decision to initiate new railway projects or to open up new lines up to 60 kms, whenever the development of the area in question would thereby be greatly facilitated, without viewing the investment outlays involved too strictly in terms of prospects of immediate return.

The employment potential of the North Eastern Railway should go up considerably with the works of restoration of the abandoned railway lines between Bhaptiahi and Forbesganj, which is already in progress and between Chhitauni and Bagaha which will be taken in hand shortly. It is also envisaged to construct new lines for the development of backward areas from Jhanjharpur to Lokaha Bazar and Sakri to Hasanpur.

The work of conversion of the metre gauge line into broad gauge on the trunk route from Barabanki to Samastipur is making rapid progress and it should absorb a good number of youngmen of different categories.

In the Fifth Five Year Plan the heavy increase in the movement of passenger and goods traffic on the North Eastern Railway will necessitate the execution of major line capacity works such as doubling and provision of tokenless block working at certain sections, provision of new crossing stations, additional loops and extension of loops at stations together with the introduction of additional trains and the augmentation of the strength of the rakes of the existing trains.

Some more conversion projects may also be taken up. There will be considerable expansion in the provision of workshops for manufacture of rolling stock, signalling equipment and improved means of telecommunication. With the execution of all such schemes and those presently under implementation, I visualize a great expansion of employment opportunities in the region.

Gandhiji, whose 104th birth anniversary we celebrate today, was a great champion of the underdog—the Harijans, backward classes, minorities and our brethern living in remote areas and hilly terrain—the Scheduled Tribes.

I have had a review made recently of the scope of employment opportunities for these neglected sections of our society. This revealed that the reservation quotas for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes were not being fully utilized. I have, therefore, decided on a number of steps to ensure that the vacancies reserved for them are actually filled up by them.

I was told Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe candidates frequently fail in the viva-voce. I am going to put an end to this. I have directed that this viva-voce should be replaced by a simple personal interview.

We have to look after the interests of all backward classes and especially the minorities like Muslims and Christains who have a feeling that they have not been getting their due share in the recruitment to Government services.

I have directed all Railway Service Commissions that they should ensure that in the recruitment they make, minorities and Harijans and backward communities should get their due share. I have asked them to see that this is achieved in a year's time.

I have also directed that academic degrees should not be the deciding factor in selections for promotion. In fact I find there is too much emphasis on academic qualifications in all sections including those held by Railway Service Commissions. Candidates are frequently judged by their ability to write and speak English. This ability to write English may well qualify a man to be a clerk. But I do not see why for other jobs like Ticket Collectors, Guards, Firemen and Assistant Station Masters we should go entirely by literary attainments. It should be possible for us to devise better criteria for selection which will take into account the actual requirements of the jobs. Since each Railway passes through different States and since much of the official work is carried on in English, for some years to come we will have to insist on a minimum knowledge of English in all candidates for Class III posts. But among those who have attained this minimum standard, the actual selection should not be simply by literary ability.

I look forward to this new Railway Service Commission of North Eastern Railway and all the older Commissions to evolve better methods of selection.

I thank you all for this opportunity to share my thoughts with you. I have now great pleasure in formally declaring open this Railway Service Commission. May it fulfil the aspirations of the people of the region and contribute to the building of an efficient cadre of railway employees.

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Chief Editor

Upendra Thakur, M.A., D.PHIL. (CAL.)

Professor & Head of the Department of
Ancient Indian & Asian Studies, Magadh University, Bodh Gaya

Editor

Yugal Kishore Mishra, M.A., PH.D.

Department of Ancient Indian & Asian Studies, Magadh University, Bodh Gaya

L.N. MISHRA
COMMEMORATION VOLUME PUBLICATION COMMIITEE
Magadh University Campus, Bodh Gaya
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